

An 'unsung hero' by the sea

Jennifer Maas



Michael Quill wants to provide people who have become disconnected with nature the chance to rekindle that relationship. And he does that by taking them out on the water.

Quill, who works as community programs manager at the Santa Monica-based organization L.A. Waterkeeper, is focused on building bridges of dialogue through his programs, which bring together community members through activities involved with the waters of Los Angeles County.

On Saturday, March 5, Quill was featured in a new photography exhibit that looks to elevate local stories of significant, but unrecognized, contributions across Los Angeles County and demonstrate how everyday individuals are creating social change in the community.

“Portraits of Compassion” showcases 30 “Unsung Heroes” of Los Angeles County who are working to improve the region, with original photography by L.A.-based photographers Sam Comen, Stella Kalinina and Noé Montes.

Conceptualized and commissioned by the California Community Foundation, the exhibit is meant to be a gift to Los Angeles County residents in celebration of the foundation's 100 years of service to the region.

"We want this exhibit to turn inspiration into action," said Antonia Hernández, president and CEO of the California Community Foundation in a press release. "The Unsung Heroes teach us that acts of kindness, compassion, generosity and courage have a ripple effect that will multiply over countless lives."

One of the ways that "hero" Quill is responsible for bringing social change to the community is through L.A. Waterkeeper's Marine Protected Areas Boat Based Survey, a program that provides the opportunity for at-risk youth to reconnect to the planet and themselves.

"This is an opportunity for those underserved, an opportunity for them to come out with us and learn citizen science and spend time on the water," Quill said. "And as they do that I saw that something would shift. And it is being part of what we are. The water is something that is our life source, we all came from water. ... This gets youth between 18 – 22 back into nature to experience a connection to the planet, a connection to their community."

Quill says L.A. Waterkeeper's programs also build a sense of stewardship in their participants.

"They encourage them to go back to their communities to talk about the things they saw," Quill said. "The story just evolves. And having these ambassadors who are new to all this come and telling people about this, that's a great thing."

Quill said that being nominated for the exhibit made him grateful just to be heard.

"When I got nominated, I thought 'Somebody must be hearing what I'm doing, somebody is really hearing what I'm doing in the world.' I listen to the community and I open possibilities. I don't try to tell anybody what to do. I just try to help us to reconnect with the planet and reconnect with each other."

"Everything we do inland affects our waters," Quill said. "We have to change core behaviors; change consciousness. Those changes can't be imposed by governments; change has to come from within our community. That's my big message."

The exhibit will run through April 4 at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes and is open to the public free of charge.

For more information, please visit calfund.org/centennial/100-activities

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